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A MONTHLY LETTER ABOUT EVANGELISM

LETTRE MENSUELLE SUR L'ÉVANGÉLISATION

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The following "Monthly letter" was written by the Rev. John Crossley, a Methodist Missionary in Ibadan, about an increasingly important and challenging field of missionary work.

EVANGELISM AMONG MUSLIMS IN WESTERN NIGERIA

In September 1958 about 20 people representative of various churches and missions met in the Netherlands to hold a consultation on Islam in Africa. In summing up the conclusions reached, Dr. George Carpenter used these words :

"1. It was evident that very little is being done to reach Muslims in Africa with the Gospel ..... The general attitude has been : 'Win pagans to Christ before they turn to Mohammed. Once they are Muslims there is little hope of winning them'.

"2. This attitude is based partly on lack of knowledge and understanding of Islam, and partly on fear of Islam because it is so largely unknown.

"3. It is therefore necessary, urgently and without delay, to make genuine contact with Islam. This involves a basic change of strategy. Islam in Africa must be given a high priority."

That is the context in which I write this letter about evangelism among Muslims in Western Nigeria, and it will be appreciated that I have to write of plans for promoting evangelism, rather than of achievements and successes.

Both Islam and Christianity established themselves in Western Nigeria something over 100 years ago, and they are now roughly equal in numerical strength. They have progressed side by side, and at the same time as Western education and ideology. So we find here an Islam, which is not a whole complex of theology, law, culture and government, in the traditional sense of Islam.

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Rather, we have Islam regarded as a personal religion in the Western sense. It is to some extent accepted that each man may choose his religion for himself. It is quite common to find a family in which some members are pagan, some Muslim and some Christian. Christians and Muslims can live in the same house without the least embarrassment. If a Muslim child, having been to a Christian school, wishes to become a Christian, there is likely to be some opposition, but rarely will there be severe persecution. If this child does well and attains position and wealth, his parents will be quite reconciled to his change of faith. If a Christian young man wants to marry a Muslim girl (or vice versa), one of the two can usually change faith, without much qualm of conscience. In the Small Ads. of the daily newspaper, under the heading "Change of Name", it is about equally common to find a John changing his name to Tijani, or a Yusuf changing his name to Joseph.

Together with this social mixing, there is much confusion of ideas. The most important daily newspaper sent a Muslim reporter on pilgrimage to Mecca, and blazoned on the front page his report "Here is a wonderful demonstration of the brotherhood of man under the Fatherhood (sic!) of God".

All this is utterly different from the traditional kind of Muslim-Christian encounter. How astonished would Henry Martyn or Temple Gairdner be to find themselves in such a situation !

The situation is equally full of opportunities and dangers. Opportunities : - Here is an open door for witness; the witness not of foreign missionaries, but of an indigenous church, whose members are of the same race, class and even family as the Muslims; not the artificial witness of a specially contrived encounter, but the natural witness that arises in the midst of everyday life.

Dangers : - that the Church faced with a watered down Islam will itself be satisfied with a watered-down Christianity; that in fact Christians and Muslims will have a basically similar religious outlook, compounded of traditional belief mixt with Christianity and Islam; and that "tolerance" will become a supreme ideal, and evangelism be interpreted as an expression of intolerance. (And in fact, some of the best Christians, realizing the defects of Islam and zealous for Christ's Kingdom, have expressed their zeal in intolerant forms).

Accordingly, the first step in the promotion of evangelism in this situation is to train the church in its attitude to Islam. I have found Romans 10 verses 1ff, where Paul is writing about his attitude to Judaism, to provide an outline of teaching about the Christian attitude to Islam.

v.1 "My heart's desire is that they should be saved"; we are not concerned to attack Islam as a rival system. We are not concerned with winning arguments, "getting the upper hand" etc. We are concerned that men and women should share the salvation which we by God's grace enjoy.

v.2 "they have a zeal for God"; we should have personal respect for Muslims as people seeking to serve God in the only way they know; we should gain a sympathetic understanding of their worship and belief.

v.2 "but not according to knowledge" - indicating the fundamental facts of the Gospel, of which Islam is ignorant.

A second step in promoting evangelism, is to help the Christian to deal with the questions or arguments which Muslims commonly raise. A certain number of these questions are widely known, even by Muslims otherwise ignorant of Islam; and they are continually repeated, often in playful taunt rather than in serious hostility. A typical conversation may go : -

Muslim : How can God have a Son ? Did God marry a wife ?
Christian : Look at this Bible, see Mark 1,1 says Jesus is the Son of God.
Muslim : But I don't believe your Bible, it is corrupted.
Christian : Jesus is the Son of God, because He was born of a virgin and didn't have any earthly father.
Muslim : But Melchizedek also did not have an earthly father (Hebrews 7,3). Do you say he was the Son of God too ?
- end of argument; stalemate and frustration !

How can Christian Muslim intercourse be rescued from this sort of fruitless interchange ? It is necessary to train Christians to answer Muslim questions with a positive explanation of the Gospel, which will raise the conversation from the level of argument to the level of witness. In this example, the Christian needs to remove the idea that the title Son of God implies a physical conception, and then he needs to give positive meaning to the title. The kind of explanation required is not abstract and metaphysical, but concrete, drawing out the imagery of Biblical terms, and reinforcing their meaning with illustration and proverb.

We have to rescue Bible texts from being used as blank counters of argument, and help the Muslim to think his way into their meaning. The Christian must aim, not to floor an opponent, but to give such explanation as may, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, make the meaning of the Gospel plain to those whose minds have been blinded by the god of this world.

This sort of help needs to be given to the Christian in dealing with oft-repeated arguments about forms of worship (Why do Christians wear shoes in church, when God told Moses etc. etc. !), about being sons or slaves of God, about bearing sins, about the Comforter, and about the Trinity.

Then a third step, and perhaps a still more decisive one, is to deal with the difference between the Gospel and Islam in their practical attitude to life. "If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation". What difference does "life in Christ" make to everyday living ? Here is something much deeper than just "being good".

A key issue is the Muslim doctrine of predestination. The Muslim term "Kadara" is on everyone's lips as an explanation of sickness, disaster and moral lapse and it expresses the attitude, "well, God predestined it, so we must just resign ourselves to it".

The philosophical problem of free-will and determinism is not relevant here (though students are ready to discuss the case of Judas ad nauseam !). What is relevant is the Christian assertion that God never predestined evil for anyone, that Christ's work on earth was a triumphant conflict with the Powers of evil, and that those who are "in Christ" do not resign themselves to evil, but join themselves to Christ in His conflict and in His triumph.

In such ways, the Christian response to life needs to be made plain, both to Muslims and Christians. When a man becomes a new creation in Christ, what is his attitude to sinners ? what if he himself falls into sin ? what if he faces temptation, if he is sick or suffering ? what difference does Christ make to him in his home, in his politics ? In these questions the contrast with the Islamic attitude will often be implicit rather than expressed, for we do not want to appear to be engaging in a polemic against the Muslim way of life. Our concern is that the full richness of Christian living should be experienced by Christians, and should exert its own appeal to Muslims.

Fourthly, while the above scheme of teaching is more or less applicable to the whole membership of the Church, there is a great need for some of the Church's leaders to meet Muslim leaders on the level of theological intercourse. In Lagos, about 20 Christians and Muslims are meeting once a quarter; at each meeting papers are read on a theological subject (e.g. Revelation, Salvation), one by a Christian and one by a Muslim) and questions and discussion follow. Such meetings must aim at

"dialogue" rather than any immediate attempt at conversion; but as an immediate outcome, one hopes to preserve the atmosphere of tolerance and of free intercourse so that the door of Christian witness may remain open in the country in years to come.

* * * * *

I hope that in coming months we can begin a systematic application of this scheme of training, especially in Leadership courses, in Christian schools, and in student groups like S.C.M. Meanwhile there is the very good news that (as a result of the consultation referred to at the start) an Islamics scholar from the Netherlands Reformed Church will shortly start in Northern Nigeria; and other workers and teams are projected elsewhere, to the end that we may "reach Muslims in Africa with the Gospel".

FOOTNOTE : Details of this scheme of training, particularly of the second and third steps described above, will be given in my book "Explaining the Gospel to Muslims" - to the published in the Key Books of U.S.C.L. (London) about April 1960.